## A Synopsis

# Multiple Displacements and Fractured Identities in South Asian Fiction: A Study in the Selected Novels of Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin and Philip Michael Ondaatje

**With Special Reference to:**

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| *Such a Long Journey* | *Family Matters* |
| *Crow Eaters* | *Ice Candy Man* |
| *Lajja* | *French Lover* |
| *The English Patient* | *Anil's Ghost* |

**A Synopsis Submitted for the award of the degree of**

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The history of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century can be conveniently summed up by the word 'colonialism'. The decolonization which followed the Second World War is reflected in the rapid evolution of literature in the erstwhile colonies as an expression of new realities and a new national political order. Postcolonial theory came into its own as a revisionist project of the early 1990s, dominated until recently by Indian intellectuals and informed by a trinity which comprises Edward Said, Gayatri C. Spivak, and Homi K. Bhabha. Postcolonial theory, as epistemology, ethics, and politics, deals with matters of identity, gender, race, racism, ethnicity, and culture as well as facing the challenge of developing a Post-colonial national identity. Homi K. Bhabha, coined the term 'Hybridity', which describes the emergence of new cultural forms from multiculturalism. Instead of seeing colonialism as something locked in the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we must transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations. "Bhabha draws some ideas from psychoanalytic theory and rejects the notion of binary identities, discussing instead migrant sensibilities and the consequent necessity for performances of one's identity as a cultural mix."[1]

The closing years of the twentieth century and the opening years of the twenty-first century witnessed large-scale evictions and expulsions from various regions in South Asia in the wake of identity assertions and growing ethnic conflict. More than twenty-six million people were uprooted within their own nations due to conflicts and human rights violations. Displacement, a term used in Post-Colonial theory, applies to all migrant situations. It refers to physical displacement as well as a sense of being socially, culturally, emotionally and psychologically out of place. An extensive body of academic literature seeks to define categories and create new typologies of displacement, migration, involuntary resettlement and identity crisis. Displacement refers to the notion of physical dislocation, banishment, exile and how one's ancestral culture is dislocated, transformed, rejected or replaced by a new one. Bill Ashcroft in his book "Post-Colonial Transformation" says, "Displacement emerges out of the interaction of language, history, visual perception, spatiality and environment in the experience of colonized peoples."[2] Analyzing the reasons of its genesis Chris McDowell and Gareth Morrell contend that,

[1] Sanga, Jaina C. *South Asian Literature in English: An Encyclopedia.* London: Greenwood Press, 2004. 251. Print.
[2] Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-Colonial Transformation.* London: Routledge, 2001, 125. Print.

"displacement is likely to occur as a result of complex set of interrelated factors, which involve coercion, physical uprooting and some measures of de-territorialisation"[3].

When people migrate to other countries or travel between adoptive countries and their homeland, they carry with them the burden of being displaced, duplicitous, different or operating with a double personality. It often means that the displaced people feel that they are falling between two stools and are unable to find a sense of identity to recognize and to create a space for themselves in the new land. This leads to fractured identities.

To say that the history of South Asia is a history of population movements is to repeat a cliché. The Partition of India on communal basis on the eve of the country's freedom caused one of the bloodiest upheavals in the history of human race. The statistics are staggering. Twelve million people displaced; a million dead; seventy five thousand women abducted and raped; families divided; properties lost and homes destroyed. The Partition of the British India resulted in the emergence of two independent states, India and Pakistan. The province of Bengal too was partitioned on religious lines. East Bengal with its Muslim majority went to Pakistan and West Bengal with its Hindu majority was awarded to the independent India. This left East Bengal then known as East Pakistan 920 miles (1470 km) away from its western counterpart. Other differences of language, culture and economy intensified resentment until in December 1971 Bangladesh was declared an independent nation. With a shattered economy, uncertain political leadership and the burden of almost 10 million returning refugees, Bangladesh faced extraordinary challenges in its struggle to survive as a nation.

The Partition of India in 1947 was an undeclared Civil War, and since then we have had disputed borders in almost every country of South-Asia. The division was mainly due to religious conflict which predicted many questions that disturb us even now across the sub-continent; they are ethnicity, communalism, the rise of religious fundamentalism and cultural rationalism. Many aspirants have revived and rephrased these questions in many complex ways and the manner in which they have to be answered has far reaching implications for all.

[3] Mc Dowell, Christopher And Gareth Morell . *Displacement Beyond Conflict: Challenges for the 21st Century.* n.p, n.d. 13. *Google Book Search.* Web. 7 July 2012.

Close to India's boundary lies Sri Lanka with its own historical and political history. In Sri Lanka, relations between two main ethnic groups, i.e., the Sinhalese and Tamils had deteriorated because of ethnic conflict and two decades of Civil War. This became the initial cause of mass migration in the 1950s. With the onset of the Civil War in 1983, the country saw a massive displacement induced by conflict to nearby India, and further to the west. Dhananjayan Srikandarajah observes that:

> The scale of displacement from Sri Lanka - some 700,000 internally displaced and another 700,000 emigrating over twenty years - has not been as large as for some other displaced groups around the world. However, the relative importance of forced migration has been massive: about one in every two Sri Lankan Tamils has been displaced, and about one in every four now lives outside Sri Lanka.[4]

Broadly speaking, these human movements can be categorized into four categories. The first category includes refugees. These include 'partition refugees' who moved from India to Pakistan and Pakistan to India after 1947, the Bengali refugees who fled from East Pakistan to India in 1971, as well as more recent arrivals of Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. The second category comprises hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons in South Asia. Uprooted by ethnic or religious tensions, induced or aggravated by demographic pressures, environmental degradation and economic marginalization, they live like refugees in their own country. A third category of uprooted people are those who find themselves in limbo between national and international boundaries as people who do not meet the definition of refugees under international law but for whom no country is willing to accept responsibility. A fourth category comprises of those people who migrate from their homeland to some foreign land in order to earn a livelihood or in search for a better way of life. These people too undergo the problem of adjustment and cultural conflict resulting in identity crisis.

Political disturbance has been a major cause for displacement in South Asia. As Anusua Basu Ray Chaudhary says:

> In almost every case, political turmoil has manifested post-colonial South Asia's attempt to mould itself into culturally unique nation-states by favouring dominant

[4] Sriskandarajah, Dhananjayan. "Sri lanka". 9 Sept. 2011. PDF file.

> national claims to cast out a minority; or, the attempt of a disgruntled minority to secede from the dominant majority to create their own uniform homeland.[5]

The Partition of India in 1947 and the secession of Bangladesh in 1971 were not the only events resulting in mass displacement. Forced deportation, mass evacuation and displacement of peoples took place in many countries involved in the World Wars. Around 205,000 men from India took part in the Second World War as India was a British colony, and people were forced to leave their country in order to serve the Colonial powers.

Displacement in South Asian Countries is also the product of economic factors. The tradition of seasonal migration in South Asia, during the Pre-colonial, Colonial and Post-colonial periods regulated permanent minority settlement, as Tamil labourers migrated from India to Sri Lanka and Muslims from Bangladesh, to India. But, "the mid 20th century saw the beginning of a change in the pattern of Indian migration. For the first time, people went not to the colonial periphery but to the metropolitan centers at the heart of the Empire-Commonwealth."[6]

Over 1000 years ago, the Zoroastrian Parsis of Iran immigrated to India to escape Arab persecution. They have since then integrated into Indian society. When the first wave of discontent swept over India violently in 1857 against the British rule, the Parsis took no part in it. Through the freedom struggle and till the present day they have maintained their own distinct customs, traditions and ethnic identity.

Living in diaspora means living in exile, forced or voluntary, and this kind of life usually leads to identification with new cultures and alienation from old homelands. In Homi Bhabha's words:

> A range of contemporary critical theories suggests that it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons of living and thinking. There is even a

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[5]Refugee Watch Online. *People of Nowhere: Stateless in South Asia, By* Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury. *A Co-Publication of Refugee Watch online: n.pag. Web.* May 14, 2012.

[6] Rai, Rajesh and Peter Reeves. *The South Asian Diaspora: Transnational Networks and Changing Identities.* New York: Routledge, 2009. 3. Print.

> growing conviction that the effective experience of social marginality…transforms our critical strategies.[7]

Therefore, most diasporic writings are suffused with consciousness of identity and the problem of living in an alien society. Literature is the reflection of life and a mirror to society. The Partition of India, the emergence of Bangladesh, and the Civil War in Sri Lanka after its Independence in 1948 are benchmarks in the history of South Asia. Not only were these events of political and economic significance, but they also influenced the social, religious, cultural and ethnic outlook of these countries. These events have impacted much of the literature produced in the South Asian countries of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The Post-Independence era in India saw the advent of the 'Big Three'- Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao laid the foundation for the growth and progress of the Indian English novel. In Pakistan the novels of Ahmed Ali and Zulfikar Ghose paved the path for writers like Hanif Kuerishi, Mohsin Hamid, Sara Suleri and many more to follow. The legacy of Bangladeshi writings in English can be traced back to the Pre-Independence undivided Bengal with writers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Michael Madhusudan Dutt. In Sri Lanka, the writings of Tissa Abeysekara and Jean Arasanayagam explored a new age in the field of Sri Lankan fiction. Some writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin, Salman Rushdie, Shyam Selvadurai, Vikram Seth and Michael Ondaatje have focused on Partition, communal violence, civil wars, ethnic conflict and World Wars leading to displacement and identity crisis. Other writers like Rohinton Mistry, V.S Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Rao Badami, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Jumpha Lahiri emphasized the diaspora and the resulting identity crisis in their works.

The authors on whose novels the proposed study is based are Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin and Philip Michael Ondaatje who with their experience, knowledge and the power of their writings, have been able to deal with the issues of identity, displacement, religious turmoil, cultural conflict and the complex multi-layered question of the self.

Rohinton Mistry, born in Bombay in 1952, is a Parsi Gujrati of Indian origin. He migrated to Canada at the age of twenty-three but his novels have an Indian setting. As a Parsi and as an immigrant, he sees himself as a symbol of double displacement and this is a recurrent

[7] Trivedi, Harish and Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Interrogating Post – Colonialisim: Theory, Text and Context.* Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rashtrapati Nivas, 1996. 4. Print

theme in his literary works. “Such a Long Journey” (1991), Mistry’s first novel, examines the life of a handful of Parsi Indians in the turbulent years of early 1970’s. The novel is set in 1971 during the period of Indo-Pakistan War and the birth of Bangladesh. Gustad Noble, the protagonist is a bank clerk and a family man. The fate of Gustad’s family is closely tied with that of the sub-continent. His daughter’s illness, his son’s refusal to go to the IIT and sudden disappearance of his intimate friend Major Bilimoria, and at last, his friend Dinshawji’s death, are the events that result in an inadvertent involvement of the protagonist in money laundering deeds and terrorism. These events in his life are at once personal and political. The novel foregrounds diversity of identity within Parsi community and the dynamic nature of the community itself.

“Family Matters” (2002) is set in the city of Mumbai, and deals with the story of a middle class Parsi family living through a domestic crisis. The novel centers on a retired English professor, Nariman Vakeel, his discordant step-children, Jal and Coomy, his dutiful daughter Roxana and son-in-law Yezad, and their children, Murad and Jehangir. It is the story of an adult sibling’s attempt to avoid taking responsibility of the father and the subsequent result of this decision. Through one family, Mistry conveys everything, from the dilemmas among India’s Parsis within the country and outside it, to the wider concerns of corruption and communalism. Parsi immigration to foreign countries for monetary security is also highlighted in the novel. Mistry focuses on the protagonist’s lost motherland which gives an insight into urban India. Through the dilemma of belonging and identity during old age Mistry highlights the vexations faced by the middle class Parsis in India.

One of Pakistan’s most prominent English fiction writers is Bapsi Sidhwa. Sidhwa was born in an eminent Parsi business family in Karachi, Pakistan on August 11, 1938. She contracted polio as a child and had to be educated at home. When she was nine, Sidhwa witnessed communal discord and the violence that followed the Partition of India. She attended the Kinnaird College for Women where she graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree. Her novels explore the problems and challenges faced by the Pakistanis both because of the ongoing conflict between Pakistan and India and as a result of immigration to places such as the United States.

Sidhwa's novel "The Crow Eaters" *(*1978*)* is about the novelist's own ethnic community, where she explores gender issues in relation to the pervasive patriarchy. At the dawn of the twentieth century in Pakistan, Freddy Junglewalla moves his family along with a pregnant wife, baby daughter, and Jerbanoo, his rotund mother-in-law, from their ancestral forest home to cosmopolitan Lahore. He opens a store there, and as his fortunes grow, so does the animosity between Freddy and his mother-in-law. While Freddy prospers under the British rule, life with the domineering Jerbanoo is another matter entirely. This exuberant novel, full of rollicking humour, paints a vivid picture of life in the Parsi community, its culture and way of life. Through this novel, Sidhwa accurately depicts the changing social milieu and identity crisis visible amongst Parsis during the British India and the social problems faced by the community as a whole.

Sidhwa's second novel taken up for the study is "Ice-Candy Man" (1988). The novel deals with the Partition of India and its aftermath. Young Lenny is kept out of school because she suffers from polio. She spends her days with Ayah, and the large group of admirers that Ayah draws. It is in the company of these working class characters that Lenny learns about religious differences, religious intolerance, and the emergence of genocidal strife on the eve of Partition. As she matures, Lenny begins to identify the differences between the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs engaging in political arguments all around her. Soon Lenny's world erupts in religious, ethnic, and racial violence. The domestic drama in the novel serves as a microcosm for a profound political upheaval and quest for identity.

Taslima Nasrin was born in Mymensingh in Bangladesh in 1962. She started writing from the age of thirteen and was acclaimed as a major writer in Dhaka in her late 20s. Nasrin has written thirty-five books, which include poetry, essays, novels and autobiography series. Some of her books are banned in Bangladesh and she too has been blacklisted and banished from both Bangladesh and West Bengal. She has been living in exile for more than eighteen years. Her works speak of her agony and sufferings. Her book "Lajja" (1993) is set in the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition saga, back in the year 1992. The stage is set in Bangladesh and the tale revolves around an extremely patriotic Hindu family. Suranjan, a prodigal middle aged man with little or no achievement in his life to boast about, is a son of a doctor. His father, Sudhamoy supported his clan during the national movement and worked for

the cause of the nation and in turn, his own countrymen rewarded him by mutilating his genitals. Despite all this, he strongly believed that Bangladesh was his home and refused to move to Kolkata (India). The story speaks of the identity issues that arise out of these dilemmas as well as the atrocities and cruelties inflicted on Hindus during the riots.

Nasrin's second novel taken up for the study is "French Lover" (2002) which is primarily a story of Nilanjana, a Bengali woman married to a Punjabi. To get away from her country, the memories she couldn't deal with and hoping that life would become beautiful, she moves to Paris. However reality is totally different and instead of enjoying Paris, she is confined to her house and treated almost as a maid and an object to satisfy the physical needs of her husband. Eventually, she breaks herself away from her husband and starts to explore Paris and herself in her own terms. The novel is the story of a woman who deals with her own confused self, her sexuality, and her quest for identity.

In the Sri Lankan context, one of the eminent authors is Philip Michael Ondaatje. He was born in Sri Lanka on 12 September 1943. He moved to England in 1954, and in 1962 to Canada where he has been living ever since. He was educated at the University of Toronto and Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and began teaching at York University in Toronto in 1971. He is best known for his novel "The English Patient" (1992), which is set during the last stages of World War II in a damaged villa of North of Florence. The story revolves around the four occupants of the villa: Hana, the fatigued and dispassionate twenty year old nurse, Caravaggio, the former spy/thief who was caught and injured by the enemy, Kip, a young Sikh Indian sapper recruited by the British to diffuse German land mines, and the English patient who is severely burned in the War. By incorporating a variety of nationalities into the novel, Ondaatje interrogates the notion of 'home', through the endless movements of the characters and the parallel dangers of war.

"Anil's Ghost" (2000*)* is the critically acclaimed fourth novel by Ondaatje. The novel follows the life of Anil Tissera, a native Sri Lankan who left to study in Britain and then the United States on a scholarship. In this duration, she becomes a forensic anthropologist. She returns to Sri Lanka in the midst of the Civil War as part of a Human Rights investigation being conducted by the United Nations. Anil, along with archaeologist Sarath Diyasena, discovers the

skeleton of a recently murdered man in an ancient burial ground which is also a government-protected zone. Believing the murder to be politically stimulated, Anil and Sarath set out to identify the skeleton, nicknamed Sailor, and bring justice to the nameless victims of the War.

Migration has resulted in building up a diasporic community which shares a common sense of rootlessness, pain and anguish of homelessness, anxiety and turmoil in a new land and longing for the homeland. The migrant must experience not only the geographical dislocation of land but also socio-political, cultural and emotional displacement. The psychological shift from one state of mind to another also causes dilemma, nostalgia, sense of displacement and loss of identity.

Ethical, cultural and religious conflicts are an essential part of South Asian history. Dissemination resulting in disintegration of the self and fractured identities has had a powerful impact on the lives of the people. The authors of many of the novels dealing with these issues have roots in South Asia and are living in Diaspora. Therefore, they show deep insight and bring a sense of personal anguish to their works. Regardless of whether the author is an Indian, a Pakistani, a Bangladeshi or a Sri Lankan, or whether he is a Hindu, a Muslim or a Sikh, a common thread runs throughout their works.

These writers may have been explored from the point of view of the topic undertaken but the extant criticism deals with an analysis of one or two writers at most. A comprehensive study of the causes and consequences of multiple displacements and fractured identities dealt by writers representing four major South Asian Countries; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka may yield significant results. Therefore, the objectives of the study are:

a) To study the various forms of displacement and the relationship between displacement and identity.
b) To study the socio-political, cultural and religious factors that result in the problem of identity.
c) To analyze the impact of displacement on the psychological states of the protagonists in the selected novels.
d) To analyze various themes related to displacement and identity crisis.

e) To analyze the various symbols and techniques used by these writers to show displacement and fractured identities.
f) To make a comparative study of the selected writers in their approaches and treatment of the consequences of displacement and identity crisis.

**Tentative Chapter Division:**

Chapter I: Introduction: Historical survey in the context of Displacement and Diaspora in South Asia

Chapter II: The Making of the Artists.

Chapter III: Socio-political perspective of displacement in South Asian fiction.

Chapter IV: Existential crisis in the selected novels of Rohinton Mistry, Bapsi Sidhwa, Taslima Nasrin and Michael Ondaatje.

Chapter V: Multiple Displacements and Fractured Identities: A Comparison

Chapter VI: Conclusion

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